

THE UNDOING OF A DOUBLE

BY AUGUST FINSTERER, M.D.
AUTHOR OF "WHOLE EYE
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[CONTINUED.]

The true bloodhound is not of large size, but sates himself with no more than a more hideous front, while his strength is prodigious. A dusky Hercules cornered by one of these black demons has brained him with a club when he made his leap or he has alighted his throat with a knife at close quarters, but the chances are always the other way. None knew better than I that in a hand to hand struggle I would be as helpless as against the assault of a panther. But my revolver contained three charges.

In the clear starlight the dog caught sight of me at the same instant that I saw him. He emitted a peculiar cry and rushed across the open space as if shot from a catapult.

I stood as rigid as iron. My panic had vanished, and I never was cooler in my life. Before the bound was half way to me I leveled my weapon and held my finger on the trigger until he was hardly five yards distant. Then I let fly.

I made the statement at the opening of this story that I was an expert with the revolver, as my numerous friends of the Seventh regiment will testify, but I never made a prettier bulleye than on that October night in a Mississippi swamp, when I sent a bullet into the brain of the bloodhound that was charging for my throat. It entered his skull between the eyes, and, ranging downward, must have plowed through his heart, my theory being based upon the consequences of the shot.

The dog uttered a rasping howl, and leaping straight up in the air for six or eight feet dropped on his side, rolled over, furiously clawing the ground and air, and then lay motionless, as dead as Julius Caesar.

My fear was that he had companions of his own species. If so, there could be no better place than the present to have it out with them. If I would maintain my marksmanship, I was good for two more.

But intense listening for two or three minutes failed to bring another sound of the nature dreaded. It was evident that only a single hound had been used at this stage of the business. A few hours would doubtless bring a change.

But I heard something else that was to be dreaded with an equal dread. It was the sound made by at least two men as they hurried through the swamp toward the spot whence sounded the shot of the revolver and the death cry of the dog. One at least had a Winchester, against which my smaller weapon was useless. I had no wish to meet Cy Walters, and, leaping down from the log on which I had been standing, I darted for the opposite side of the clearing, with the knowledge that not a moment was to be lost.

Great as was my haste it was within a second of being too late, for the men who were pursuing me hot footed were closer than I suspected. Being from under the protecting shadow of the trees, I was in plain sight as I reached the other side of the clearing at the moment the leading pursuer emerged from the wood. An unexpected complication saved me from being killed before I could plunge into shelter.

There were three men after me, Cy Walters, Archie Hunter and the owner of the bloodhound that had just finished his last hunt for a flying fugitive. It so happened that the bereaved dog owner was in the lead, he probably being better acquainted with the peculiarities of his animal, but the others were only a short distance behind.

The sight of the motionless form on the ground filled the man with irremediable rage. With an imprecation, he bounded forward and paused over the carcass, as if to make sure of the truth. A glance was sufficient. Then, Winchester in hand, he glared around for sight of the one who had done the deed.

He was in time to catch sight of my vanishing form, as he brought his gun to his shoulder, while Walters and Hunter had just dashed into the clearing. Casting one glance over my shoulder, I leaped among the trees and lodged to one side with my head bent low, as the bullet whistled over me.

But I had not yet shaken off my pursuers, and the chase was on once more with redoubled vigor.

CHAPTER XII

My pursuers were so close to me that there was danger of betraying myself by the noise I made in hurrying through the wood. The clearing gave them opportunity to run across it much faster than I could pick my way through the undergrowth.

Bearing this in mind, my object was to reach a point where I could not be discovered in the obscurity unless the men came directly upon me. It was already established that there had been but one bloodhound on my trail, and he being disposed of nothing more was to be dreaded from his species.

Naturally I made an abrupt change in my course as soon as I was fairly in the wood. I moved to the left, considerably slowing my gait, with a view of suppressing every sound of my movements. It was impossible to do more than partly to succeed, for the bushes

to have been still. I had traversed less than 50 yards in this manner when I paused and listened for evidence of my pursuers, but the stillness of the swamp was profound. Probably they had stopped with the same object. At any rate they did not know exactly where I was, and I determined not to give up the advantage. The uneasy feeling, however, which came with the certainty that they were close at hand led me to edge farther off, doing so with such stealthy care that I was sure of not betraying myself. My progress of necessity was slow, but still it was progress, and that was a consolation.

Suddenly I felt a cold sensation in the foot which I thrust forward, as with bowed head I parted the bushes in front so as to admit of my noiseless advance. The cause of the chill was apparent. I had placed my foot in water that came over the shoe top. Since, however, the thing could not be helped and the foot seemed to rest on firm support I did not withdraw it. Still leaning over I advanced the other foot and was startled to find the water reach half way to my knee.

"This won't do," I reflected as I withdrew. "By and by I shall be swimming."

That such was the fact became apparent the next moment, when I perceived with the aid of the star gleam that I was standing on the edge of a stream of water whose depth, I had already found, rapidly increased from the shore. It was easy to distinguish the other bank, which was hardly 20 feet away. I had come to the side of a creek that wound through Black Man's swamp and could reach the farther shore only by swimming.

All well understood my feeling that safety could not be attained except by placing myself on the other bank. The belief was chimerical, but it was none the less urgent for that. My aversion to swimming the stream, however, was intense. The water was chilly, and I should be excessively uncomfortable in my saturated and dragged clothing. Some other means of fording the creek must be found.

Meanwhile I did not forget my pursuers, who were undoubtedly picking their way through the wood much nearer than was pleasant. Because of this fear I began stealing along the bank of the dark stream in the weak hope of finding a favorable place for crossing, though sensible at the same time of the absurdity of the expectation.

"By gracious, but that's lucky!" I exclaimed within the following ten minutes as I halted at the base of a thick cypress, as I judged it to be, which, starting on the edge of the creek just before me, grew straight toward the other bank, as if nature had set out with the purpose of forming a foot-bridge, but changed her mind just before reaching the farther shore, and, curving upward gradually, attained the perpendicular. Thus the first twenty odd feet of the trunk took the form of a bow, after which the course was as vertical as that of a mountain pine.

"I couldn't ask for a better bridge," was my conclusion after a brief study of the course of the vegetable crank in front of me.

Being without any luggage, my limbs were free, and, hesitating only long enough to make sure of my bearings, I carefully climbed upon the trunk, which was almost horizontal, with a diameter of nearly two feet. No limbs appeared until at the point farthest from the bank which I was leaving—that is, where the trunk began curving upward toward the perpendicular. There a bifurcation took place, the tree dividing as near as may be into halves, each of which again subdivided until the small or limbs and branches were numberless.

I regarded this conformation with amazement, since it offered a good support from which to leap to the shore that was not distant.

With so broad a base and the firm, shaggy bark upon which to rest my feet, it ought to have been easy to traverse the brief distance upright. I should have done so had the sun been shining; but, as it was, I began creeping forward on my hands and knees, ready for any treachery in my bridge.

I had not gone half the distance when a shiver of fright passed through me at the reflection that I was repeating in a small way the experience of a few minutes before. In other words, I had advanced into the open, where I was in view of my pursuers if they should happen to reach the stream anywhere near where I did. Had this thought occurred to me before setting out I should have delayed my action until there was too late to turn back, and with more nervousness than I had felt since starting on my flight I hurriedly crept along the trunk, not pausing until I reached its first forking.

The vast relief of this situation will be understood when it is stated that it gave me the benefit of the shadow cast by the branches above as well as by the trunk on the shore. There was little light, but it was mighty comforting to know that at that moment none of it reached me. Clinging one arm about the large limb for steadiness, I rose to the upright posture, so close now to the further bank that it was an easy leap to reach it. Standing thus, secure for the moment from detection, I turned my head and peered into the darkness which had just been placed behind me.

"I've been mighty lucky so far," I muttered. "I shouldn't be surprised if those three fellows were near the base of that tree!"

By heavens, I was right! The thought had been in my mind to frame itself when the crackling of a twig told me that pursuers had reached the very spot. Had there been any doubt of the fact it was removed by a voice which I recognized as that of the grim and terrible Cy Walters:

"He was heading this way when we last heard of him, so in a way he was right. His gruff tones were in no way a key that but for the profound stillness I should not have caught the words. Although aware of the exact point where the sound issued, I could not see him nor either of his companions.

"I wonder if he crossed on that tree," remarked Archie, though I was not sufficiently familiar with the voice to identify the speaker.

"It would be just like him. Hank knows every turning of the swamp."

"And that's just why he wouldn't climb over here," added Cy.

"Cause he knows he wouldn't gain nothing by it."

"He'd gain as much as by going anywhere else."

"A couple of us oughter feller and find out," observed a man who, I suspected, was my man for something.



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pected, was the owner of the defunct bloodhound, a suspicion that was confirmed by his addendum:

"I'd rather he'd stole all the horses in Mississippi than to shoot Victor. Hank Beyer has got to settle with me for that."

"If you want, you kin feller him over that tree," said Cy. "It may be Hank was fool enough to try it, but Archie and me will push things on this side of the creek."

"It's a good idea anyway for us to divide. Some one will be sure to run agin' the scamp and have it out with him."

And with this reasonable remark the owner of the lamented dog stepped upon the horizontal trunk and began moving toward me, crouching among the limbs a few paces away, with the immovable conviction that matters were growing more interesting with each passing minute.

CHAPTER XIII

Nothing was more certain than if I remained where I stood for two minutes longer a collision between the man and myself must take place. Instead of creeping along the trunk of the tree, as I had done, he walked upright, or rather slightly stooped, and I began to feel that I was a balance pole, though such an idea was a trifle ridiculous. I had thrown forward like an Indian trailing an enemy through the woods.

Being outside of all shadow and in the full starlight, he was in plain view, while unable to see me, though he was likely to catch sight of my figure with a step or two farther advance. He carried a Winchester in his right hand, as if it were a balance pole, though such an idea was a trifle ridiculous. I had thrown forward like an Indian trailing an enemy through the woods.

My overwhelming disadvantage lay in knowing nothing about Black Man's swamp. The negro Ernestus had said that its area was extensive and during and before wartimes many runaway slaves had found refuge within its recesses. It followed that it was a good hiding place, though a persistent hunt was certain to unearth me in a comparatively brief while.

When I had advanced a few rods, I stopped to listen. So far as I could ascertain, none of my enemies was moving near me.

"What an unprecedented situation!" I reflected. "I, a freeborn citizen of the United States, a man never before charged with crime, am a fugitive in a Mississippi swamp from a man of my own color, and I shall get along all right. My pistol is aimed at your breast, and I only want the excuse to serve you as I did the other dog a few minutes ago."

Wormwood and gall must have been his reflections at that moment, but there was no help for it. Walters and Hunter, however, were so near, would have their suspicious roused and hurry back to the spot, in which event my own situation would be anything but enviable. I had formed my plan and now carried it out.

Nothing was heard of the couple who were threading their way up the bank

but he remained mute. Probably he was in the situation of the one who kept his lips sealed because of his inability to do justice to his feelings. He had straightened up, and his pose must have been irksome with the weight of the gun in one of his hands.

"Drop that Winchester," was my next command, "and do it quick!"

It would have been unjust to accuse him of sluggishness, for my words were scarcely uttered when the rifle splashed into the water and sank from sight. Beyond question that particular individual had met with adversity that night, for his choice bloodhound and most valuable weapon were irretrievably gone.

"I have a great mind to shoot you as it is," I added, careful to modulate my voice to its most impressive bass. "Don't move hand or limb until I give permission."

"Who the— is doing so?"

"My man had found his voice at last. 'And don't speak another word if you want to save your worthless life.'"

He checked himself abruptly, aware that he was violating orders.

Having transfixed him, so to speak, I now proceeded to carry out the rest of the scheme I had formulated. That was to withdraw from the dangerous spot without his knowledge. He was so perfectly covered that he was likely to remain passive for a considerable time, provided I succeeded in my effort.

Before making the attempt I spoke: "Your right hand is drooping. Up with it!"

He obeyed so promptly that I smiled. Showing my revolver into my hip pocket, he did not suspect I had my gun, and, gently parting the bushes in front, began a stealthy withdrawal. So carefully did I work that when I had accomplished a dozen steps I was confident a listening fawn would not have been alarmed.

It would be interesting to know how long that individual held his place on the trunk of the tree. It may have been 10 or 15 minutes or a good deal longer. Possibly despite my care he discovered what I was doing and hurriedly withdrew to join his companions. At any rate, I acted upon the theory that such was the fact.

Amid this flurry and contest of wits one reflection brought me more comfort than I could have expected. I had got the best of three men who had devoted their energies to my undoing. The grim Cy Walters and his stepson would have to admit to their companions that I slipped out of the window while they were on guard, and, as they believed, without outside help, while the man who had been so close to me on my trail had lost the brute and his Winchester, and the three had not yet laid hands on me.

But it was no time to celebrate myself, for in more than one sense I was not yet out of the woods.

Sooner or later the most unfortunate of the trio would find he was holding his hands to the command of a non-entity and would make haste to retrieve his blunder. Each and all had the most compelling reasons to run me down without an hour's unnecessary delay and would neglect no means to do it.

Mingled with my partial exultation, which it will be admitted was justified, lay the knowledge that, though I had crossed the intervening creek, I had not succeeded in obliterating my trail. Disregarding the fact that one of my pursuers knew the precise spot where I had passed over the stream, it would be the easiest matter in the world for a bloodhound to trail me along the trunk to and from the point where I had landed.

At daylight when vigilance would be at its height, the bloodhound would be at my heels again, and by summoning the dogs to their aid must speedily run me down unless I adopted more drastic measures. It was because of this certainty that I decided to keep near the creek, in order to take to the moment the necessity appeared.

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RECONCILED

BY WILLARD N. JENKINS.

"I'd no idea that your father was so much in debt," said Mrs. Claxton, away back and forth in her low rocker. "We knew the farm was mortgaged, of course, but there are debts that I didn't know anything about. Why, fifteen hundred dollars wouldn't more'n make us square with the world, and the farm wouldn't bring over eight hundred at the most."

Jared Claxton looked wearily at his sister Esther.

"How are we goin' to pay these debts?" he asked.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said his mother, proudly. "I thought you'd want to pay 'em. Well, there's only one way that I know of. You and I must carry on the farm, an' Esther must take the village school. She's well qualified to teach it. We must all stand together, an' if it's any late debt, we must be prudent, an' deny ourselves the fruit of our own raisin, until we owe no man a dollar."

Jared, a fine young man of twenty, sighed heavily.

"It's a gloomy prospect," he said. "Now I know what's on your mind," said Mrs. Claxton, briskly. "You're thinkin' about Rachel Moore. You must get her out of your head. She's out of the question for you, at least, until we are out of debt."

"Of course," he assented, but his countenance was clouded. He could not help thinking that if his father's late debt were more prudent, things might have been different.

"I'm glad you're sensible about it," said his mother. "If all had went well, probably Rachel would have been your wife in a year or two, but your poor father's gone, an' it will take us years an' years to pay his debts. Things has got to be fixed up around here before long, too. I'm glad, Esther, that I insisted on your havin' a good education, but then you took to books, an' Jared never did."

"I'm very glad to be able to help," said the girl, quietly.

Esther was twenty-two. She was not pretty, but she had youth and health. Her nose was a trifle sharp, and there was a certain smoothness in her voice which suggested that she could be very firm when she chose.

The Claxton farmhouse was low and roomy. The exterior was painted brown, and the front door sagged on its hinges. The barn was gradually falling to pieces, and the shed was even more dilapidated. The farm consisted of seventy-five acres of rough, stony land; there was a small orchard and a pasture which would furnish feed for only two cows. Certainly, the prospect was not very encouraging.

But Mrs. Claxton was a bustling, energetic woman, and her children were like her rather than their easy-going father. They all worked with a will. Esther succeeded well as a teacher. She did not win the love of her pupils, but they respected her, and her progress was satisfactory. Jared ceased his visits to Rachel Moore. She knew the reason, although there had been no engagement, and so no words of explanation passed between them.

Years went by, and improvements were made about the Claxton farm. The barn was repaired, the old shed was torn away and a new one took its place. Thrifty young Mrs. Claxton was busy in the orchard, and new furniture appeared in the house and yet the debts were steadily decreasing. At last, fifteen years after Mrs. Claxton's death, Mrs. Claxton, now a widow, was one morning to find herself not only out of debt, but in country parlance fore-handed.

"We've done well," said Mrs. Claxton, as she sat at the table. "Esther, you can give up the school, an' go to Boston to visit your Aunt Susan, if you want to. I know you are tired."

Esther looked pleased. She was thirty-seven now. The bloom of her youth had passed; there were many fine lines about her eyes, and her hair was touched with grey. Fifteen years of constant teaching had worn both upon her looks and her disposition. She had never had any real love for the work, and it had long ago become hateful to her, though no one had suspected it.

That was a pleasant summer to the Claxton family. Esther made her visit in Boston. When she returned, her mother had something to communicate to her.

"Jared has been payin' attention to Rachel Moore again. I expect he's lived single all these years on his account. Probably he will marry her, but I can't bear to think of it, and I don't know what to do."

"I don't suppose we can help it," said Esther quietly, but her mother saw that she was not pleased.

A week later Jared went to his mother and sister and said bluntly, "I am goin' to be married to Rachel Moore."

"We expected it," said Mrs. Claxton coldly. By the tone and attitude Jared understood that his mother and sister would not welcome the woman he was to marry. He understood that they thought the tie of constant effort of the last fifteen years as binding as wedlock, and did not wish it broken. But he tried again.

"You used to like Rachel in the old days," he said pleadingly, "an' she's just as good now as she was then."

Mrs. Claxton raised her hand warningly.

"Don't praise her to me," she said, and he turned sadly away.

But once after that Jared spoke of his marriage, and then he said: "I am to marry with you to-morrow. Shall you be there?" And his mother answered "No." But Jared was not disheartened. The fifteen years' struggle had culminated in his resolution to marry Rachel Moore.

He married Rachel, and after a few weeks brought her home. No one appeared to greet them.

"Mother," he called, as he went through the house. In two remote rooms he found his mother and sister.

"Rachel is out in the kitchen," he said. "An' we are here, where we've been since we got married. He'll be all right for a few minutes."

Then toddler, toddle away—the little feet took the path that was forbidden them—straight through the unused passage way and taking the end. He pushed and shuffled against it in his feeble way.

"What's that queer noise at the door?" asked Mrs. Claxton, looking up from her sewing.

Esther was at the stove, frying doughnuts. She turned around now.

"It sounds like a big dog," she replied. But when the door opened, in came a baby; triumphant, happy, eager. Every line in his baby face, every look of his sunny hair, had been given in the widow's heart for many years, and it suddenly opened to show her like a new-born.

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years, when a baby was born. Then one day Rachel asked her husband to take the baby and go to his mother's. He understood, and taking the child in his arms went and knocked at the door. "Who's there?" said his mother's voice.

"Your son and grandson,"

"There was a slight noise within, and a few words were spoken in a low tone, and then Esther said smoothly:

"We are busy and do not care to see you."

He returned and laid the baby by his wife. She did not need to question him by word or look.

Two more years went by. One morning Jared called his wife to come down into the garden. He had a rare plant to show her.

"But it is damp and I can't take the baby out," she objected.

"Leave him where he is. He'll be all right for a few minutes."

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"It's Jared over again," she cried. And in a moment she was down on the floor, kissing the little one. Esther looked on, bewildered at this strange happening. And Jared and Rachel, hastening after the child, stood in the doorway, witnessing the first step in a reconciliation.

"Come to mamma, baby," said Rachel to the child. He looked at her, laughing, over his grandmother's shoulder.

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